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French-Iranian Relations: Between Ideological Confrontation and *Realpolitik*

Clément Therme

Since the end of the period between 2003 and 2005, European and French foreign policy towards Iran have followed the US lead under both Republican and Democratic administrations. The myth of European-led nuclear negotiations with Iran, conducted without interruption from 2003 to 2015, is to a significant extent the product of a rewriting of history by diplomatic actors from the Quai d’Orsay. In constructing this myth, their objective is to downplay the hardline stance taken by France on the Iranian nuclear issue before the conclusion of the Iran deal in 2015.¹ It is true that the European “E3” – France, Germany, and the UK – played a major diplomatic role between 2003 and 2005 at the initial stage of the internationalization of the Iranian nuclear issue. Nevertheless, the Western strategic line has always been defined by Washington, despite a nominally independent European diplomatic initiative and a European-led administrative framework. Indeed, for reasons related to the lack of European economic sovereignty and the refusal of Europeans to really implement a policy of independence from Washington on this issue, the 2005-2007 period is marked by the end of a European alternative for a resolution of the Iranian nuclear dossier throughout a Brussels-led diplomatic process.

Since 2007, one has to consider the progressive alignment of European capitals following US guidelines. This alignment cannot be hidden by the excuse made by French diplomats of Iran’s unwillingness to cooperate to find a political solution to the nuclear issue. The 2008 election of Barack Obama as president resulted in the definition of a new US policy toward Iran that took the Europeans by surprise.² As a consequence, they took

formal responsibility of the nuclear negotiation but under the US umbrella. Indeed, the impetus for Washington's new Iran policy is a *sine qua non* condition for any European diplomatic engagement on this matter.³ The diplomatic empowerment of the European diplomatic apparatus by the Obama administration was in contradiction to the hardline stance taken by Brussels in the latter part of George W. Bush's presidency (2006-2009). Despite the contradiction on the substance of European policy towards Iran before and after the rise of the Obama administration, there is one element of continuity: European capitals were always the junior partner of the US administrations. The case of French-Iranian relations since 1979 is also a reflection of this difficulty to reconcile a realist perception of Iran, especially its economic potential for international companies and the transatlantic objective to build a common non-proliferation policy towards the Islamic Republic.

This hurdle to build a strong French-Iranian economic partnership is first and foremost due to the nature of the Iranian political regime. After the Islamic Revolution of 1979, the new Iranian foreign policy based on an anti-Western ideology (Khomeinism) meant the end of the French-Iranian alliance initiated by General Charles de Gaulle. At the end of the 1970s, Iran was Paris' first regional economic partner in the Middle East, and Iraq the second. In the 1980s, France's friendship with Saddam Hussein and its cobelligerent status alongside the Iraqi regime during the first Gulf War (1980-1988)⁴ transformed bilateral nuclear cooperation into a source of conflict. The Eurodif dispute would not be settled until the early 1990s, but cooperation in civil nuclear power never resumed.

Finally, while France sought to rebalance its bilateral relations in the Persian Gulf for the benefit of Iran after the Second Gulf War (1991), the limits of this new economic partnership can be best seen in the history of the French oil company Total's presence in the Iranian oil and gas sector from 1996 (South Pars 2 and 3) until the company's withdrawal from South Pars 11 in 2018.⁵ This partnership was first interrupted due to the new Iran policy of French president Nicolas Sarkozy, who decided in July 2007 to sacrifice French economic interests in Iran in favour of the nuclear non-proliferation cause. Paris then moved from a vision of Iran mainly based on regional issues and the promotion of economic interests to one shaped by a "strategic" outlook that focused almost exclusively on the so-called Iranian nuclear threat. This was the result of the takeover of the Iranian

nuclear dossier by the strategists against the realist regionalists within the French bureaucratic system. This ideological victory of the so-called French neoconservatives was based on the accusation that the regionalists had been too close to regional authoritarian regimes in general and the Iranian one in particular since the early 1990s. The strategists used the Iranian nuclear “threat” as a way to provide a new definition of French national interests based solely on the idea of non-proliferation rather than a more balanced policy that also takes into account the defense of French economic interests. This new French policy ended in 2015 with the Iran deal and the effort of French companies to return to the Iranian market after their first withdrawal in 2007.⁶

At the end of 2007, Sarkozy presented himself as a mediator between Washington and Tehran.⁷ This new diplomatic ambition was in contradiction to the hardening of the French position on the Iranian nuclear issue. It was therefore not surprising that this mediation failed, and Paris’ diplomatic initiative was in fact stillborn. Indeed, following the visit of Ali Akbar Velayati, former minister of Foreign Affairs and diplomatic adviser to the supreme leader, the French proposal for “large-scale bilateral nuclear cooperation in exchange for abandoning the activities of enrichment” on Iranian territory⁸ was rejected by the Islamic Republic because of the priority given by Tehran to direct negotiations with Washington, avoiding the European intermediary. The rupture of 2005-2007 in the official French discourse on Iran can best be explained by several factors: the regional policy of France, which focuses on relations with the Arab shore of the Persian Gulf and with Israel; the interests of the French military-industrial complex; the distorting prism of French *nuclearocracy* (the French Alternative Energies and Atomic Energy Commission [CEA]) and its obsession with Iranian nuclear program,⁹ as well as the choice to favor the alliance with the US by abandoning the Gaullist objective of independence.¹⁰

However, the Atlanticist dimension of Sarkozy’s foreign policy did not imply a break in the definition of France’s overall objectives, which remained unchanged. What did change were the means of achieving them. The new policy was based on the idea that France would be in a better position to realize its ambitions within the framework of the Atlantic alliance and the EU.¹¹ The turning point in Sarkozy’s foreign policy is clearly mentioned in the 2008 white paper on defense (*Livre blanc*), which calls the Iranian

nuclear program a “major threat, likely to disrupt international security in the years to come.”¹² Preventing the nuclearization of Iran became a strategic priority for France. The denial of the definition of the new policy in 2005-2007 towards Iran, however, continues to be at the center of the discourse of most French diplomatic actors involved in this process.

To avoid the Cornelian dilemma between the transatlantic friendship and the promotion of French businesses in Iran, President Emmanuel Macron has also presented himself as a mediator between President Donald Trump’s America and Iran. Yet Macron’s strategy faces hurdles. First, the idea that the US somehow needs France in order to negotiate with Tehran is flawed. The new US strategy is founded on the assumption that there is nothing to negotiate with the “rogue regime” in Tehran despite the confusion in Trump’s rhetorical support for talks with the Islamic Republic.¹³ Second, President Hassan Rouhani has frequently said he prefers to talk directly with Washington rather than with European countries in general and France in particular because, in the end, Washington is the main decision maker for the West – in Rouhani’s words, the US is *kadkhoda* (chief of the village).¹⁴ Second, the main asset of French diplomacy in dealing with Tehran is the economic incentive for French companies to invest in the country. But since May 2018, it is obvious that French economic actors follow US unilateral economic guidelines on Iran – not French ones.¹⁵ According to the EU representative for foreign policy, there is a need at the European level to protect European-Iran trade:

Iran, for its part, must return to full compliance with its nuclear obligations; but it also needs to be able to reap the economic benefits envisioned in the agreement. Having already established measures to protect our companies against extraterritorial US sanctions, we in Europe can do more to satisfy Iranian expectations for legitimate trade.¹⁶

This idea of a need to bolster European economic sovereignty is still a work in progress more than five years after the conclusion of the Iran deal and more than two years after the US withdrawal from it. As a consequence, trade became a source of dispute between European states and Iran. The effect for French-Iranian bilateral relations has been decisive. The fall of bilateral trade and the so-called mediating efforts of France have provoked

an Iranian rejection of any French influence on the nuclear dossier. Even if Rouhani continues to hold a dialogue with Macron, one has to consider the reinforcement of anti-French feelings amongst the most conservative political factions inside the Islamic Republic. In other words, rather than a decrease of international tensions around the Iranian nuclear issue and Tehran's regional policy, there is now a bilateral crisis between Tehran and Paris. This is the result of French regional alliances (both the "Arab policy" and the alliance with Israel), as well as the consequences of the untold story of French alignment with the Trump administration policy towards the Islamic Republic of Iran.

Notes

- 1 Parsi, T. (2017). *Losing an Enemy. Obama, Iran, and the Triumph of Diplomacy*. London: Yale University Press. p. 236.
- 2 "No one was shocked. Everyone was pissed off," in Kerry, J. (2018). *Every Day Is Extra*. New York: Simon Schuster. p. 497.
- 3 Personal interview with Stanislas de La Boulaye, Paris, April 2019.
- 4 See Angeli, C and Mesnier, S. (1992). *Notre allié Saddam*. Paris: Olivier Orban.
- 5 See Perrier, M. (2019). *L'autonomie relative des firmes transnationales françaises vis-à-vis de la diplomatie de l'État français : le cas du marché iranien depuis 2006*. Unpublished MA dissertation. Institut d'études politiques de Paris.
- 6 There were 40 business meetings between French and Iranian partners between 2015 and 2016 organized by the MEDEF (usually the number of business meetings for each Middle Eastern country is two per year). Personal interview with a MEDEF representative, Paris, September 27, 2018.
- 7 Araud, G. (January 2016). Un regard sur les négociations nucléaires avec l'Iran, *Les Carnets du CAPS*, 22.
- 8 Ibid.
- 9 On the role of the CEA as a foreign policy actor, see Blarel, N. and Sarkar, J. (July 2019). Substate Organizations as Foreign Policy Agents: New Evidence and Theory from India, Israel, and France. In *Foreign Policy Analysis* 15(3). pp. 413-31.
- 10 On the decisive period of George Pompidou and Giscard d'Estaing in shaping French policy in the Middle East, see Bourrat, F. (Summer 2020). La Politique française dans le golfe Persique: entre enjeux économiques et défis sécuritaires. *Confluences Méditerranée*, 113, pp. 91-104.
- 11 Talmor, A. and Selden, Z. (2017). Is French defence policy becoming more Atlanticist? *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 30(2-3), p. 162.
- 12 See the French White Paper on Defence and National Security (*Livre Blanc sur la Défense*) of 2008, p. 27, <http://archives.livreblancdefenseetsecurite.gouv.fr/2008/>

- IMG/pdf/livre_blanc_tome1_partie1.pdf; Martin Briens believes that “the nuclear non-proliferation regime has so far not prevented the interruption of Iranian and North Korean military nuclear programs,” in Briens, M. (2007). Le régime international de non-prolifération est-il efficace? *Les Carnets du CAP*, February 20, p. 24.
- 13 Therme, C. (November 2, 2017). Macron, America and Iran: Searching for a Middle Way. *The Interpreter*, Lowy Institute. <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/macron-america-and-iran-middle-way>. Also, John Bolton mentions in his memoir the meeting between Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei: “Khamenei was far tougher than Rouhani had been the day before. This shows the folly of Macron and others (Trump included) talking to Rouhani rather than the ‘Supreme Leader.’ Was there something unclear about the title?” See Bolton, J. (2020). *The Room Where It Happened: A White House Memoir*. New York: Simon & Schuster, p. 354.
 - 14 See Etemadi, N. (April 18, 2014). Le Guide suprême croit-il vaincre les Américains par la négociation? Issy-les-Moulineaux, *RFI*. <http://www.rfi.fr/fr/mfi/20140418-iran-guide-supreme-americaains-negociation>
 - 15 Les entreprises françaises cèdent et quittent l’Iran. (June 6, 2018). *La Croix*. <https://www.la-croix.com/Journal/entreprises-francaises-cedent-quittent-Iran-2018-06-06-1100944762> (Last Access, 18 September 2020).
 - 16 Borrell, J. (July 14, 2020). Saving the Iran Nuclear Deal. *Project Syndicate*. <https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/iran-nuclear-deal-at-five-by-josep-borrell-2020-07>